

PART THREE

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UTAH—LAND OF NATURAL

Diversity

Dry deserts, mountains and wetlands

WETLANDS IN UTAH:

A variety of wetland areas can be found interspersed throughout Utah's desert landscapes and mountains. Water is vital to the survival of most animals and in a dry state like Utah wetlands are especially critical for many species of wildlife. Wetlands come in a variety of types. A wetland is defined as an area that is temporarily or permanently covered with water during a portion of the year, supports water-loving plants such as cattails, rushes or sedges, and/or contains hydric (saturated), wet soil that is anaerobic (lacks oxygen). Wetlands can derive their water from runoff of surface water, precipitation or from springs. In Utah, a few types of wetlands are playas, wet meadows, riparian or stream-side environments and marshes.

Playas occur as shallow lakes or dry salt flats. They are found in the western and southern parts of the state. Salt flats do not appear to

be wet, but beneath the hard, saline crust, the soil remains saturated from rainfall and groundwater runoff. It is estimated that more than two million waterfowl use shallow playa lakes each year during migration.

Wet meadows are found in the

mountains at higher elevations. Heavy vegetative cover of sedges, sedges, grasses small willows and wild flowers often makes these important but frequently overlooked wetlands seem dry. Raptors and songbirds share these productive wetlands with deer, elk, moose and red fox.

Riparian areas are found along the edges of lakes, rivers and streams. Vegetation can consist of cottonwood, alder and box elder trees, willows, sedges, grasses, horetails and a variety of understory shrubs. These wet areas act as an oasis to wildlife such as tiger salamanders, bald eagles, belted kingfishers, dippers, river otters and numerous songbirds.

Marshes are found in association with freshwater ponds and lakes at lower elevations. Vegetation associated with marshes include bulrushes, sedges, willows and cattails, plus a variety of other aquatic plants such as duckweed. Highly productive ecosystems, marshes provide habitat for an abundance of wildlife species including muskrats, harriers and



In a dry state like Utah, wetlands play an especially important role for wildlife.

UTAH'S WILD NOTEBOOK



Wetlands occur in many locations, like these lakes in the Wasatch Mountains.

other raptors, white-throated swifts, bank swallows, red-winged blackbirds, carp, herons, egrets, coots, grebes, ducks and other waterfowl, plus numerous other migratory birds such as avocets, sandpipers and plovers.

Although we discuss each of these areas as separate regions, in reality, because wetlands are contained within Utah's deserts and forested mountain areas, and because the existence of mountains plays a significant role in capturing the water streaming within and filling the wet areas of the state, these environments might be viewed as one unique, diverse and intriguing landscape that supports the fascinating flora and fauna of Utah.

Educator lesson idea

Many species of wild animals making their home in Utah's deserts were mentioned within this article. Those animals found in Utah's forests and wetlands can be found in Parts

II and III online as mentioned at the end of this article.

For this lesson, first find pictures of the animals mentioned and discuss which of Utah's environment(s) they live in. Pictures within the two Utah Wildlife Photo Series packets are a good set of pictures to begin with. Each picture has information about the species and a range map on the reverse side. (Not all the species mentioned in the article however are contained within the photo packets.) These packets can be ordered from Project WILD (see below within WILD Educator Resources section).

Next have students each pick one of the environments, a forest, desert or a wetland site in Utah that they either know about or can make up. Have them write a detailed story about taking a hike or going hunting in their particular environment. Have them describe their environment during their visit, what season they are

there, what the temperature is etc. Have them also describe the different types of wild animals that live in their environment and any which they actually see (or see sign of) during their visit. You may also want to have students illustrate their story.

After the students have written their stories, have them share the stories with the class. Have them read about their visit, but not tell the class what environment they are writing about. Then the other students can try to guess what environment their classmate is visiting in his/her story.

WILD Educator Resources — Request these items from Project WILD by calling (801) 538-4719 or e-mailing dianavos@utah.gov.

- *Common Plants and Animals* — Lists of species common to Utah's wetlands, mountains and deserts.
- *Life Zone Map of Utah* — Full-sized, colorful poster showing bounds of Utah's life zones.
- *Wildlife Photo Series No. 1 and the newly created Wildlife Photo Series No. 2* — Set of 16 photo cards (each set) featuring Utah species with natural history and management information for each on the reverse side. \$7.00 each.
- *Rainfall and the Forest* — Copy of activity, supplemental Utah vegetation, elevation and precipitation maps, and Utah precipitation data to conduct this excellent Project WILD activity.
- *Desert, Forest and Wetlands Trunks* — Three separate trunks featuring different environments of Utah for loan to educators. Each contains background information articles, comprehensive activity guides, posters, puppets, children's books, videos and more.
- *Wildlife of Utah: A Photo Essay* — Beautiful, full-color book highlighting Utah's different environments



UTAH'S WILD NOTEBOOK



Another type of wetland, playas occur as shallow lakes or dry salt flats in low area of Utah's Great Basin.

and wildlife species found within each. \$6.00.

WILD About Reading — Books for learning more:

- *A Naturalist's Guide to Canyon Country* by David Williams, Falcon Pub. Co., 2001.
- *A Walk in the Desert* by Rebecca L. Johnson, Carolrhoda Books, 2000.
- *Desert Life* by Barbara Taylor, Dorling Kindersley Ltd., 1998.
- *Desert Voices* by Byrd Baylor, Aladin Paperbacks, 1993.
- *Mojave* by Diane Siebert, HarperCollins Press, 1988.
- *What Good Is A Cactus?* by Peter Marchand, Roberts Rinehart Pub., 1994.
- *Deserts* by Peter Murray, Childs World, 1996.
- *Deserts* by Greg Reid, Chelsea House Pub., 2004.
- *All Wet! All Wet!* by James Skofield, Harper and Row, 1984.
- *Between Cattails*, by Terry Tempest Williams, Charles Scribner & Sons, 1985.
- *Leapfrogging through Wetlands* by Margaret Anderson, Nancy Field and Karen Stephenson, Dog-Eared Publications, 1998.
- *Squish!: A Wetland Walk* by Nancy Luenn, Atheneum, 1994.
- *Wetlands* by Pamela Hickman, Kids Can Press Ltd., 1993.
- *Signs Along the River* by Kayo Robertson, Roberts Rinehart Pub., 2000.
- *Wetlands* by Emilie U. Lepthien and Joan Kalbacken, Children's Press, 2000.
- *Forest Animals* Christopher Butz, Steck-Vaughn Co., 2002.
- *What Is a Forest?* by Bobbie Kalman, Crabtree Pub., 2002.
- *The Temperate Forest: A Web of Life* by Philip Johansson, Enslow Pub. Inc., 2004.
- *Temperate Forest* by Greg Reid, Chelsea House Pub., 2004.
- *Pine Trees* by Allan Fowler, Children's Press, 2002.
- *Rocky Mountain Tree Finder a Manual for Identifying Rocky Mountain Trees* by Tom Watts, Nature Study Guild, 2003.

It's WILD! — Project WILD activities for teachers and students that correlate to this topic include:

- Rainfall and the Forest (see WILD Educator Resources for activity supplements)
- Designing a Habitat
- The Edge of Home
- Watershed

Related Web sites:

- Wetlands — <http://www.wildlife.utah.gov/wetlandsed>
- Deserts — <http://www.desertusa.com>
- Forests — <http://www.dsisd.k12.mi.us/mff/Environment/EcologyForests.htm>